

ABSTRACT

AFRICAN AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

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B.A. UNIVERSITY OF NEW ORLEANS, 2001

THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS UNSEEN: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF SEXUAL  
IDENTITY IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN

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Thesis dated May 2004

This study examines the various ways African-American men identify themselves sexually. Many African-American men practice same sex and same-sex relations, but do not identify themselves as gay or homosexual. A case-study analysis approach was used to analyze data gathered in Atlanta, Georgia, using 110 male respondents. The researcher found that these men bifurcate their identity because of multiple social factors. The conclusions drawn from the findings suggest that homophobia, heterosexism, and poor constructs of black manhood are the foremost reasons African-American gay men cannot accept a gay identity.

THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS UNSEEN: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF  
SEXUAL IDENTITY IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN MEN

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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DEPARTMENT OF AFRICAN AND AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

DECEMBER 2003

R.IX T.94



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This moment is so much bigger than me! Both this moment and manuscript are dedicated to Richard Bruce Nugent, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, and every black gay man who is fighting the struggle for liberation alongside me. I must first and foremost thank my God for loving, understanding, accepting, and making this moment possible. It is simply His grace that led me to Dr. Daniel O. Black, Dr. Teresa B. Fletcher, and Dr. Barbara A. Moss—a brilliant committee to whom I am eternally indebted. A very special thank you goes to my beloved thesis chair, Dr. Daniel O. Black, whose contributions to me over these two years are inexplicable and immeasurable—he is simply marvelous! Special thanks also go to my father who now rests with the Creator, and to my beautiful mother, sister, nieces, and praying maternal grandmother for believing in me. So much of this journey could not have been traveled without the love and support of my dearest friends, especially Shemetra Carter, Lamont Robinson, Previn Butler, and Teri F. Lawrence, who helped me to maintain my sanity, and, in many ways, to usher in my scholarship. Thank you all. A very special thanks also goes to Valerie Daniel, for her friendship and dedication to graduate studies.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Statement of the Problem

African-American gay men (and women) have always endured a marginalized status, both in American and among their own people. To identify oneself as black and gay, a reality some Afrocentrists find oxymoronic, is often to write one's own death wish. Scholars, activists, and lay persons alike who write and/or struggle for the inclusions of gays and lesbians in the black community are often dismissed or scorned because of their non-conventional stance on who and what should be considered "black." As a result of such narrow constructs of sexuality, black men who have sex with men often do not identify themselves as gay because the weight of this label is usually more than any man is willing to carry. Said differently, many African-American gay men bifurcate their identity, i.e., they sever their sexual behavior from their definition of self, in order to live and thrive among a people whose homophobia has been known to take lives.

As a child, I remember the isolation which accompanies the presumption of an effeminate boy's sexuality. I remember the daily taunts of "fag" and "sissy" that flooded my ears and drowned my self-esteem in innumerable ways. My family ridiculed me as if I were a stranger, and the church sanctioned—indeed reinforced—their betrayal. I remember gangs of young boys kicking, dragging, punching, cursing, and hating me simply because I was attracted to boys, homosexual, a bold soul willing to embrace a gay identity. What I was not willing to do, however, was simply shoulder an unbridled construct of manhood my ancestors had declared was my destiny as a black man in America.

Years later, this troubled past ignited an academic desire in me to research African-American men and gay identity. But instead of discovering a distinctly gay identity among African-American men, I discovered several fragmented identities. A black man's desire to love another man and to incorporate this truth into his declared identity presents an insurmountable hurdle for the majority of black gay men—not only because of an anti-gay historical context in America, but also because of the cost he may very well have to pay to be openly gay in the black community.

On November 3, 2003, Greg Love, a Morehouse College student, was brutally beaten with a baseball bat in a campus dormitory shower by a fellow student because his assailant believed Love was gay and admiring his body. Love's assailant could only offer, "He was staring at me" as his reason for attempting to kill him (*Atlanta Journal Constitution*, [Atlanta] 7 Nov. 2002). Love barely crawled away from this incident with a concussion, missing teeth, and cracked ribs. Love's attack was not based on him affirming a gay identity, which he has not, but on his assailant's homophobia which caused the latter to believe a possible wandering eye justified an act of violence most heinous.

Edwin L. Greene states, "To be gay then is to not be a man. Straight men or straight acting men are the only men who count" (Greene, 1991, 37). This statement has been expressed through the lives of men who yearn for acceptance in both their own oppressive black community and the patriarchal, oppressive white society in which they live. The African-American gay man is a double minority: his blackness is perilous and his gayness is irrevocably demonic. Marlon Riggs illuminates this idea with, "If I am not allowed to be Black because I am gay, and not allowed

to be gay because I am Black, and not allowed to be human because I am both Black and gay, than who or what can I be?" (Riggs, 1986, 12)

On the other hand, contemporary gay men have created various identities by which to mask their homosexuality. For example, few identify themselves as gay or homosexual, while many identify themselves as bisexual, down-low gay, down-low homosexual, down-low bisexual, straight, and down-low straight. The prefix "down-low" is as explanatory as its derivative—"down" and "low"—both symbolizing under, hidden, beneath, not seen, and below. The men who use this prefix conceal their sexual practices from the public eye by masking themselves in straight men's make-up. For instance, these men study resolute masculinity obsessively and reproduce whatever is definitively masculine at the time. Rapper Ice Cube maintains on behalf of black masculinity that "Real Niggas Ain't Gay" (quoted in Constantine, 2000, 13). Consequently, young men who are sexual chameleons who bolster themselves with rap music cannot be gay—even to themselves—because they would no longer be seen as or identified as "Real Niggas" in the black community. The "Real Nigga" is seen as the pinnacle of this ill-constructed manhood, professed not only by Ice



Cube, but also by several other rappers and black men in general.

Similarly, the man who identifies himself as down-low typically conceals his sexual identity from his sexual partners, especially his female sexual partners, which, of course, can cost women their lives. More specifically, this down-low secret is problematic to the lives of black women because they are overwhelmingly unaware of the possibilities that lie in unprotected sex with their down-low lovers. Although any sexual relationship could be compared to a game of Russian roulette, the relationship between the down-low man and an unsuspecting woman, or any unsuspecting person, is especially dangerous. The down-low man is identity fragmentation at its best; however, he is not the only sexual chameleon. Because of everything aforementioned, this thesis aims to explore the identity fragmentation of contemporary African-American gay men and to provide a critical apparatus by which to explain homophobia's continued existence in the black community.

#### Significance of Study

This thesis is important in that it will usher in a new, liberative understanding of sexuality and sexual difference in the black community in general and help gay

black men specifically garner a healthy identity. The voices and findings herein will also compel the black community to re-examine its constructs of manhood as well as re-examine the ways these constructs hinder the liberation of all African Americans. Further, it will be a small yet significant contribution to the eradication of homophobia throughout America. Perhaps most significantly, this study will offer African-American gay men constructive ways whereby to build a healthier identity and dismantle their own perpetuation of homophobia and, consequently, their own subjugation.

To be sure, if there is to be a black revolution, or black liberation, black Americans must realize that the black gay man is part and parcel of this communal freedom. Therefore, the revolution cannot occur until all black beings and accompanying levels of differences are, at the very least, respected. Actually, the survival of black Americans depends heavily upon an ability to recognize difference in the African-American community and to utilize these desperate voices in the creation of a vision which frees everyone.

## Limitations of the Study

The greatest limitation of the study is finding subjects to survey who are willing to admit that they have or have had sex with men. The aforementioned agents of their identity fragmentation also prohibits possible respondents from discussing their sexual identity with an openly black gay researcher, and additionally, allowing such information to be anonymously documented.

The literature concerning sexual differences among black men is quite limited, as most black scholars seem to be avoiding the issue altogether, largely because to be associated with gay issues typically equates to one enduring a certain level of public scorn. Hence, this void left me scrambling in the dark for studies concerning black men and sexuality, but, in the end, a few brave scholars such as Essex Hemphill and James Baldwin left enough light in the lighthouse so that I found my way home.

## Chapter Organization

In chapter 1, the researcher introduces the study and examines the problem. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature and includes an exploration of theories that are applicable to the study. It also contains the methods by which the data was collected. Chapter 3 renders a

historical survey of homophobia from the 1920s to the present. Similarly, chapter 4 explores the Gay Liberation Movement of the 1960s through the 1980s, as it pertains to black gay men. Chapter 5 expresses the findings by the researcher and demonstrates the effects of chapter 3 and its historical context of homophobia and chapter 4 and the discussion of a lack of a formal black gay movement. Chapter 6 concludes the study.

## Definition of Terms

The following terms are employed by the researcher to explore this study:

**Bisexual** - describes a man who has sex with both men and women. This individual expresses his sexual identity both publicly and to his sexual partners.

**Black Church**- describes the traditional southern black church, which is typically of Baptist, Methodist, or Pentecostal denomination.

**Black Community**- describes people of African descent living in the United States who identify their race as black.

**Down-Low** - describes a man who does not openly express his sexual practices or his sexual identity. This is a colloquial phrase adapted by popular hip-hop culture to describe men who are not "recognizably" gay though overtly masculine. This phrase is synonymous with the phrase "closeted." The respondents herein also use "DL/Down-Low" as a prefix to their sexual identities.

**Down-Low bisexual** - describes a man who has sex with both men and women but does not disclose his sexual identity or his practices.

**Down-Low gay** - describes a man who has sex exclusively with men but does not openly express his sexual identity to the public.

**Down-Low homosexual** - describes a man who is only sexually attracted to other men, but has not engaged in sex with men, and does not openly express his sexual identity to the public.

**Down-Low straight** - describes a man who has sex with men, but does not view his sex with men as homosexual, nor does he view his sex with men as a factor of his sexual identity; consequently, he continues to view himself as heterosexual/straight.

**Gay**- describes gays and homosexuals inclusively. Gay here is also used to describe a man who has any type of sex with men and socially identifies himself as "gay."

**Homosexual**- describes a man who has not had a sexual act with men, but has a sexual attraction to men and acknowledges that attraction.

**Identity Fragmentation**- describes the bifurcation of sexual identity from ones total identity.

**Straight** - describes a man who believes himself to be heterosexual.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature concerning African-American men and sexual identity is extremely limited. However, there are several texts which address African-American manhood, masculinity, and male identity. Still, African-American gay men are typically excluded from these texts as if they somehow are not African-American men. Na'im Akbar's *Visions of Black Men*, for example, encompasses the above topics, but never mentions black gay identity in the discussion of black male identity. Akbar dedicates his book "to some men who carry the vision" (Akbar, 1, 1991), and, of course, none of the men listed are gay. The implication here is that black gay men have no communal allegiance and have never carried the vision of their people. James Baldwin, Bayard Rustin, and Essex Hemphill are among an entire cadre of black men who would vehemently disagree with Akbar. Among the "visionaries" listed in Akbar's dedication is Molefi Asante who, in *Afrocentricity*, describes the identity of the black gay man as "white decadence."

This description is problematic because it not only characterizes the black gay man as a betrayer of the masculine ideal, but also presents him as a traitor of his race. Furthermore, this description assumes that African people—from the pre-colonial period to the present—were unaware of homosexuality and, thus, could not conceive of such an identity among them. So desperate to explain the genesis of black male homosexuality, Asante also identifies “prison breeding” as the culprit for the “outburst of black gay men” (Asante, 65, 1980). While this phenomenon certainly proliferates among the prison population, it is erroneous to suggest that this is the reason black men are gay. Many gay black men have never been imprisoned, and, again, Asante’s position assumes that homosexuality in black men is a master-minded plot by whites to cause genocide on the black race. However, Asante neglects to realize how deadly his homophobia and heterosexism are to the health and unity of black people as well.

In total concurrence with Asante are Nathan and Julia Hare who, in their book, *The Endangered Black Family: Coping with the Unisexualization and Coming Extinction of the Black Race*, state that homosexuality is a part of a genocidal plot constructed by the “white-liberal-radical-



moderate-establishment coalition" (Hare, 151, 1984).

Somehow, whites continue to be the blame and the architect for black men's sexuality and subsequent tension.

Similarly, Jawanza Kunjufu's *Not Allowed to be Friends and/or Lovers*, perpetuates such homophobic ideology.

Kunjufu asserts that "black boys become gay because the preponderance of white female school teachers" (Kunjufu, 1989, 110). Kunjufu's statement implies that black boys "become" gay through external influences, but makes no mention of their interactions with black women as the potential cause. Kunjufu's statements, like the aforementioned, further suggest that black gay men are anomalies to the black community and beneficial only to the conniving mind of conspiratorial whites.

The idea of a white plot and the disregard for black gay men is also the echo of Robert Staples', *Black Masculinity*. Staples articulates Molefi Asante's stance on homosexuality when he says, "The nation's prisons are the main places where homosexual preference is evident—because of the unavailability of women" (Staples, 1982, 88).

Similarly, Minister Farrakhan in a speech at Morgan State University, offers:

Those of you—who are homosexual—you weren't born [that way] brother—You never had a strong male image. . .

[These] are conditions that are forced on black men. You're filling up the jails and they're turning [you] into freaks in the jails. (Farrakhan quoted in Eure, 1989, 138)

Moreover, all of the aforementioned black scholars supposedly believe in black brotherhood, but how can this brotherhood exist when hatred and separation are the pillars that uplift their fraternity?

Addressing the topic of African-American men and sexuality is a group of far more liberal scholars. One such intellectual is Marlon Riggs, whose "Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen" documentary asserts:

I am a Negro faggot, if I believe what movies, TV and rap music say of me. My life is game for play. Because of my sexuality, I cannot be black. A strong, proud, 'Afrocentric' black man is resolutely heterosexual, not even bisexual. Hence, I remain a Negro. My sexual difference is considered of no value; indeed it's a testament to weakness, passivity, the absence of real guts-balls. Hence, I remain a sissy, punk, faggot. I cannot be a black man because by the tenants of black macho, a black gay man is triple negation. (Riggs, 255, 1991)

Riggs' words speak volumes to the act of bifurcation gay men commit upon their sexual identity. It appears implausible for one to be both; thus, gay men live invisibly because black gay identity is practically impossible to define and almost never socially approved. Riggs also offers the notion that the hatred of "Negro

fags" is absolutely parallel to the racist construction of African-American identity. Riggs' example of the racist construction of African-American identity is a poignant observation of the ways in which racism works to identify and marginalize a people, while simultaneously using those same oppressed people to oppress other such groups. Riggs' hypothesis on paralleled oppression is proven through the examples given by the aforementioned black intellectuals who vehemently speak against racism by whites, but are homophobic. Their positions suggest that one injustice is better than other injustices. Further, in "Tongues Untied," Riggs speaks of being expelled from kinship in a gay community because of his blackness:

I was intent on the search for love, affirming my reflection in eyes of blue, gray, green. Searching, I found something, I didn't expect, something decades of determination assimilation could not blind me to: In this great gay mecca, I was an invisible man, still I had no shadow, no substance. No history, no place. No reflection. (Riggs, 203, 1991)

Riggs gives a treatise that is rarely seen; he addresses both sexuality and identity in one black body. Riggs explores the difficulty in being both black and gay. His gayness was accepted by the blue, gray, and green-eyed white men he encountered, but those same eyes erased his race, consequently, erasing him. Additionally, Robert Reid-

Pharr's *Black Gay Man* offers an obscure look inside the life of black gay men. Its title suggests a text that juxtaposes the three identities—black, gay, and man; however, it does not. The text, instead, explores each identity independently, which is problematic because it basically re-capitulates the bifurcation of identity by black gay men.

To be sure, the literature concerning black male homosexuality is sparse. For example, Janis F. Boham's *Psychology and Sexual Orientation* speaks of sexual orientation as it is manifested through sexual lifestyle, but offers no mention of the psychology of a black homosexual and the psychosocial factors that one faces as a black homosexual in trying to forge a homosexual lifestyle—if lifestyle is even a viable descriptor. Similarly, S. Kiefer and Martin S. Weinberg's "Homosexual Identity: Commitment, Adjustment, and Significant Others" speaks greatly to homosexual identity, but does not speak to a black homosexual identity. In the same way, Graham Thompson's *Male Sexuality Under Surveillance* does not unveil any black male sexuality. Put simply, black gay men continue to be disregarded in literature that addresses the complexity of sexuality in identity formation.

Moreover, the subject of bisexuality often excludes black men as well. However, black homosexuality must encompass the bisexual because, quite often, the bisexual black man could be gay but afraid to identify himself exclusively as such. Orna Izackson's "If Half of You Dodges a Bullet, All of You Ends up Dead" illumines this point. The text does not pay specific attention to black male bisexuals, but it does pay attention to the ways in which bisexuals assimilate in order to gain social acceptance. The social conflicts that black gay and bisexual men face are quite central to this research because it is those social conflicts that often frame the individual identity. Cheryl Clarke's "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in The Black Community" explores the levels at which black homosexuals are excluded from the black community and mainstream society and, as a result, remain silent about sexuality and homophobia.

One such place in which black homosexual men are most silently active is the black church. Horace Griffin's "Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches" addresses this issue by saying,

[Black] Gays and lesbians endure sermons that define them as sick people and never expect to have their relationships recognized and affirmed verbally or in a ceremony. Gay men who desire to be a part of the

ordained ministry must deny their gayness and pretend to be heterosexual, even if it means marrying.  
(Griffin, 117, 2000)

James Baldwin, a black gay literary genius, was also forced initially to bifurcate his sexual identity due to the influence of the church. Though he did so unwillingly, *Giovanni's Room* demonstrates the severing of Baldwin's sexual identity from his racial identity. Baldwin used an all white cast of characters to depict a tragic gay love story. Its protagonist, David, fragments his identity throughout his life. As a teenager, he has a sexual experience with his best friend Joey, but after the experience, he denounces sexual feelings for men and especially for Joey. Following their sexual experience, David offers:

But, above all, I was suddenly afraid. It was borne on me: But Joey is a boy. I saw suddenly the power in his thighs, in his arms, and in his loosely curled fists. The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. Precisely, I wanted to know that mystery and feel that power and have promise fulfilled through me. The sweat on my back grew cold. I was ashamed. The very bed, in its sweet disorder, testified to vileness. (Baldwin, 1956, 15)

As the book unfolds, David has a relationship with Giovanni and lives as a gay man in a gay relationship until his former girlfriend makes plans to return to Paris, and, upon her return, he abandons Giovanni and his life as a gay

man. David's inner monologue echoes the voice of many contemporary gay men who fragment their identity and lead double lives. With himself, he debates:

I cannot say that I was frightened. Or, it would be better to say that I did not feel any fear—the way men who are shot do not, I am told, feel any pain for awhile. I felt a certain relief. It seemed that necessity for decision had been taken from my hands. I told myself that we both had always known, Giovanni and myself, that our idyll could not last forever. And it was not as though I had not been honest with him—he knew about Hella. He knew that she would be returning to Paris one day. Now she would be coming back and my life with Giovanni would be finished. It would be something that happened once—it would be something that happened to many men once. (Baldwin, 1956, 125)

This story is important because it depicts the existence of several men who struggle with their sexual identity and, as a result, continue to fragment their identity throughout their lives.

The identity fragmentation shown in *Giovanni's Room* is relative to the identity fragmentation shown in the popular writings of E. Lynn Harris. Harris' novels are flooded with sexual identity fragmentation. Most of Harris' male characters are "DL," meaning the characters live dual, secret, bisexual lives. While Harris' novels unearth a down-low secret in the black community, they also help to spring forth more separation, self-hatred, and identity fragmentation among black gay men because this segmented,

heterosexual-privilege-granting identity has become the pinnacle for contemporary black gay men, subsequently marginalizing those who cannot assume this glorified "DL" identity. Harris' novels help to increase homophobia because black women begin to assume that every black man is gay, thus, every black gay man either becomes the black woman's opponent or foe. Harris' first novel, *Invisible Life*, has a title that aptly characterizes the literature on black gay men—[almost] invisible.

#### Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a post-modernist perspective. Post-modernism maintains an egalitarian view, one that works for the "ending of binary and analytical polarities such as black and white or male and female because such polarities cause inequality, e.g., racism and sexism" (Ritzer, 2000, 614). Such inequalities are evident in America specifically and Western thought in general. And, unfortunately, they permeate the black community as well. For example, a dangerous, debilitating binary polarity in black American society is the labeling of some adult males as "men" while others are always "not men." The requirements to be deemed a "man" are shallow proscriptions like appearance and sexual prowess. Without these, a male



simply does not meet the socially acceptable mode of maleness and masculinity. The crime here is that, if he does not fit into the proscribed mode, he is considered weak, impotent, and/or effeminate, and the jeering, mocking and physical abuse he is sure to encounter reminds him constantly of his exclusion from the category of "man".

An offspring of such socially constructed binary polarities is "gay men" and "men who have sex with men." Post-modernism argues that all people are equal in a society; thus, all men regardless of their sexual orientation, should be celebrated as men. There is no need for differentiation prescribed via one's sex partner. According to George Ritzer's *Sociological Theory*, post-modernism is also one of few theories that examines the convergence of both race and sexuality—two elements central to this research. Ritzer offers, "But even if the form[of postmodernism] is nearly unrecognizable, the content will still involve important, wide-ranging ideas about social issues, especially race, gender, class, and sexuality" (Ritzer, 2000, 614). The significance of this thesis in conjunction with post-modernist theory is to aid in eradicating not only gender and sexuality inequality, but also homophobia, especially in the black community.

Further, applying this theory to the black community will increase a level of respect for all of its members, which will thereby increase a level of sexual identity acceptance in black gay men.

## Methodology

### Sample

This thesis is designed to show the fragmentation of sexual identity from overall identity in African-American gay men. The research will provide reasons, via the utilization of a survey instrument, as to why contemporary African-American men who have sex with men bifurcate their sexual identity. One hundred and ten African-American men were surveyed. The aim was to survey as many men as possible for a random sample. All of the respondents were over age 18.

### Instrument

The questionnaire survey is the most widely used data gathering technique. As Neuman observed,

Surveys produce information that is inherently statistical in nature. Surveys are appropriate for research questions about self-reported beliefs or behaviors. The survey asks many people (called respondents) about their beliefs, opinions, characteristics, and past or present behavior. (Neuman, 2000, 245)

Survey research can include both a questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire guided the interviews, hence, making it possible to examine the possible relationships that existed among three variables: behaviors, attitudes/beliefs/opinions, and self-classification. This instrument was not pre-tested. These three variables are segmented into the following categories, which evolved into ten questions:

**Behaviors:**

Have you ever had any type of sex with another man?

- a. yes      b. no

Do you currently have sex with men?

- a. yes      b. no

Do you currently have sex with women?

- a. yes      b. no

Who are you open to about your sexual identity?

- a. everyone      b. family      c. friends  
d. co-workers/employees      e. church members  
f. only sexual partners

**Attitude/Beliefs/Opinions:**

Is there any difference between gay, homosexual, and down-low?

- a. yes      b. no

Do you feel that you can be open about your sexual identity at all times?

- a. yes      b. no

Do you feel that you cannot be open about your sexual identity at all times because

- a. you are afraid  
b. it's too hard being both black and gay

- c. most black men like other black men who are not open about their sexuality
- d. because you are a real man
- e. because of your family

**Self-classification:**

How do you identify yourself?

- a. gay      b. straight      c. bisexual      d. down-low/DL
- f. homosexual

Do you consider yourself

- a. masculine   b. effeminate   c. both masculine and effeminate
- d. neither

Do you think that sexuality affects your status in

- a. the black community
- b. the black gay community
- c. work
- d. church
- e. school
- f. all of the above

**Procedures**

The researcher approached subjects, asked them to complete a survey, and was typically successful in getting them to comply. The researcher went to areas specific to gay men, e.g., various gay bars in the Metro-Atlanta area. Surveys were also administered in areas that male prostitutes frequent, such as parks and train stations. The data were obtained over a three-day period—Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. This weekend time frame was important because Atlanta is the site of an annual black gay pride celebration, which was taking place this particular

weekend, so it was imperative to survey as many participants of the celebration as possible. These men were selected for the unique purpose of studying the means by which black males identify themselves as gay, homosexual, bisexual, straight, down-low, down-low gay, down-low homosexual, down-low bisexual, or down-low straight. The researcher does not argue that the men surveyed are representative of the entire black gay community; thus, this is an exploratory study. Similarly, there have been other exploratory studies done on the same population although such studies often appear in non-academic texts such as *Honey*, *Essence*, and *Vibe* magazines. This thesis aims, then, to lend intellectual credibility to the study of black men who fragment their sexual identity from their larger self; hopefully, such academic integrity will aid in the reconstruction of a positive, holistic, celebratory self for every black male in America.

## CHAPTER 3

### ROOTS: AN HISTORICAL VIEW OF HOMOPHOBIA

It is all so simple to illustrate the methods contemporary black gay men use to assimilate and conceal their sexual identities, thereby fragmenting their total identity; however, it is quite difficult to illustrate the reasons why such fragmentation occurs. One feasible reason is the ubiquitous nature of homophobia, especially in the black community. To be sure, the seeds of homophobia are deeply rooted in American History; however, it seems to have made its first real blooming in the black community during the Harlem Renaissance—a period between 1920 and 1940 of black cultural and artistic enlightenment in which many of the artists during the period were homosexual, yet their sexual identities were expressed obscurely, especially via the use of double entendres by writers. During this era, hidden sexual identities can be attributed to narrow constructions of manhood and rancid homophobia. Yet in the midst of these debilitating social attitudes, the Harlem Renaissance was a time of identity reconstruction for the Negro.

Popular writings by public scholar W.E.B. DuBois suggests that there was an expectation for the Negro to rise to a respectable social and intellectual level—a level of civility projected by whites—and all who did not or could not rise to that level were deemed a failure to the race. For example, DuBois' "Talented Tenth" essay suggests that

The Negro race, like all races, will be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it's the problem of developing the best of this race that they may guide the masses away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races. (DuBois, 1903, 4)

This passage is not homophobic in language, but its rigid construction of acceptable modes and behaviors births virulent constructs of manhood and masculinity. For instance, the implication of "exceptional men" appears to be limited only to the educated, which then erases the possibility for the informally trained man [or woman] to usher in DuBois' vision of talent. Further, this definition is simply not inclusive of difference on any level; thus, it is plausible to infer that the men of this time believed that, in order to be accepted as an "exceptional man," they had to fit into DuBois' construct of exceptional or

talented. And certainly gay black men of the era were far from DuBois' notion of "acceptable."

This inference is made evident through the lives and works of Alain Locke, Countee Cullen, and Langston Hughes, all of whom are believed to have been homosexual, but concealed their sexual identity to fit into the heterosexist norms of the time, the patriarchal constructions of a Negro intellectual, and the category of "exceptional man."

Alain Locke's *New Negro* speaks to constructing an opposition to "the Old Negro who had long become more myth than a man" (Locke, 1925, 47). Locke suggests: "The Old Negro, we must remember, was a creature of moral debate and historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism" (Locke, 1925, 47). Locke appears to be gallantly challenging the oppressive construction of the Negro, which he possibly interpreted as a hindrance to his sexual identity. It also appears that Locke may be challenging a growing homophobia. Yet what is more homophobic and rarely addressed is Locke's own homophobia. If indeed Locke were homosexual, but refused to challenge the pestilence of homophobia, he becomes one of the agents by which homophobia was perpetuated. In *Lighting*



*the Harlem Renaissance AFire!!!: Embodying Richard Bruce Nugent's Bohemian Politic*, Seth Clark Silberman touts Locke as the "black gay Renaissance ideologue" (Silberman, 2000, 255); however, Locke appears not to embrace a gay identity. To have embraced a gay identity might very well have cost him his life.

While the history of homophobia is usually a detailed account of oppressive acts of heterosexual men, homosexual men must also be held accountable for their silent compliance with and participation in homophobia. Identifying Locke as a compliant and participating homophobe is important because he was homophobic toward fellow Harlem Renaissance artist Richard Bruce Nugent and, consequently, undermines the struggle to destroy homophobia in the black community.

Nugent is described by Silberman as "flamboyant and openly gay before the term even originated" (Silberman, 2000, 254). Silberman's essay expresses the homophobia that Nugent faced from both DuBois and Locke. Nugent's "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade," is the first published story by an African American that openly depicts homosexuality, and from DuBois, Nugent received such responses as, "Did you have to write about homosexuality? Couldn't you write about

colored people? Who cares about homosexuality?"

(Silberman, 2000, 267). Similarly, Locke is quoted in Jurgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* as stating "his [Nugent's] flamboyance was an outright attack on the goals of the Renaissance itself" (Habermas, 1991, 50). Both DuBois' and Locke's assertions depict the prevalent homophobia of the time. Thus, it is quite plausible to suggest that DuBois' theories and construction ushered in a bridled manhood that Locke was willing to fasten upon himself and, hopefully, Nugent. Similarly, such free expressions of homophobia by two very prominent figures might also explain why others like Cullen and Hughes concealed their sexual identity as well.

Alyn Brocke examines the life of Countee Cullen in his essay "A Few Black Gay or Bisexual Men and Women Who Changed the World." He posits:

Cullen tried so vehemently to conceal his sexuality that he married twice. His first wife, Nina Yolande Du Bois, daughter of W.E.B. DuBois, he married in 1928, but the marriage soon ended in divorced. DuBois was granted a divorce because two months after their marriage Cullen ran off to Europe with his best man Harold Jackman. In 1940 Cullen married Ida Mae Robinson which ended with his death. (Brocke, 1988, 381)

Cullen's life and work suggest that he was in search of acceptance from the public scholars of the time, so to appear heterosexual, he married, which was also an attempt to avoid the stain of a homosexual label and the exclusion sure to follow. Cullen's work suggests that he employed a level of subterfuge to mask his sexual identity. For example, his poem "Tableau" can be interpreted as a homosexual or homoerotic poem. It reads:

Locked arm in arm they cross the way,  
the black boy and the white,  
the golden splendor of the day,  
the sable pride of night.  
From lowered blinds the dark folk stare,  
And here the fair folk talk,  
indignant that these two should dare  
in unison to walk.  
Obvious to look and word they pass, and see no wonder  
that lightning brilliant as a sword should blaze the  
path of thunder. (Cullen, 1994, 248)

Brocke contends, "This is a poem about gay love and addresses gay liberation before a gay liberation began" (Brocke, 1988, 385). The language of the poem speaks of two boys shrouded in a romantic light, which, at that time, and even now is out of character and may even be deemed inappropriate. However, the erotic nature of the poem can be read behind the guise of platonic friendship. Unlike Nugent's life and his "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade," the poem further depicts Cullen's unwillingness to lay claim to his

sexual identity or to speak boldly about homosexuality in general. Put simply, Cullen's views characterize not only the homophobia of the time, but also Cullen's own inability to embrace a homo-centered identity.

Langston Hughes, a close friend and chief supporter of Nugent, also never identified himself as homosexual during his life time, nor does any of his work clearly reflect homosexuality as a theme, although it is Hughes who writes,

We younger Negro artist who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (Hughes, 1931, 91)

Given Hughes' powerful manifesto, one might expect him to embrace his sexual "otherness" without shame; however, he does not. Instead, he submits to the same homophobia as Cullen and Locke. Hughes' affirmation of "free within ourselves" alludes to an unapologetic level of self acceptance, yet if Hughes was gay, as Silberman suggests, he never unapologetically embraces his sexual identity in his work or his life. Hughes, along with several other Harlem Renaissance writers, is described as "homosexual without the official label" by Silberman who posits this:

Despite the notion that no African Americans were homosexuals, there were many bulldaggers and faggots in Harlem. Despite the lack of the official homosexual label, people knew who they were; and Nugent was not the only one. Other black gay men and women in Harlem—Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Gladys Bentley, Countee Cullen, Harold Jackman, George Hannah, Bessie Smith, Claude McKay, Alain Locke, Angelicka Weld Grimke, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Augustus Granville Dill, and Alexander Gumby, among others—all participated and contributed to the bohemian culture from which Nugent drew his work. (Silberman, 2000, 257)

Brocke describes Hughes as "asexual" by saying that "Hughes was never seen with either a male or a female lover"

(Brocke, 1988, 387). Brocke's attempt to present an androgynous Hughes furthers homophobia because it grants Hughes the privilege of assumed heterosexuality, indirectly casting shame upon the homosexual possibility. The androgynous argument also affords Hughes a level of sexual ambiguity, which creates a hiding place for him and contemporary black gay men who have sex with men but choose not to carry the weight of a homosexual identity.

Contemporary gay men often prefer the category of androgyny in order to maintain a level of heterosexuality or, in essence, a level of safety and at least a modicum of social acceptance.

Moreover, Nugent was menaced by homophobia and heterosexism not because he was gay, but because he was "flamboyant" or effeminate. His self-acceptance of both his

sexual identity and his effeminacy as crucial aspects of his identity was seen as undoubtedly antithetical to Negro manhood. Obviously, homosexuality hindered the constructs of manhood in the 1930s, and, consequently, explains why specifically Locke and Cullen might have been reluctant to embrace a non-conventional sexual identity. To have identified themselves as gay might have dismembered them from their scholarly ranks and plausibly discredited them as legitimate Negro artists. However, they found it was extremely important to express their own homophobia in order to remain in good standing both among colleagues and the black community in general. Their participation in homophobia helped to create a climate of self-hatred for black gay men that still hovers over the black community today.

Similarly, Suzanne Pharr's "Homophobia as a Weapon of Sexism" addresses the exclusion that obvious gay men, like Nugent, face:

Gay men are perceived also as a threat to male dominance and control. Visible gay men are the objects of extreme hatred and fear by heterosexual men because their breaking ranks with male heterosexual solidarity is seen as a damaging rent in the very fabric of sexism. (Pharr, 1990, 143)

Pharr's assertion, while extremely valuable, does not include homophobia as practiced by homosexual men, nor does it include the importance of race and how race plays a very central role in homophobia. Homophobia against black men not only employs racism, but also compares black men to constructs of both white and black masculinity and constructs of black manhood. Homophobia toward black men not only measures them against manacled constructs of black manhood and masculinity, but also racist white constructs of masculinity. Consequently, it is also plausible to suggest that the homophobia exhibited by black men—both heterosexual and homosexual—is a result of the need to gain notoriety from black and white men and, if not white men themselves, from the systems and institutions they govern such as Christianity, formal education, and economics.

Paradoxically, the Black Arts and Black Power Movements of the 1950s and 1960s and their tone of revolution and black liberation caused an eclipse of more rancid homophobia than the Harlem Renaissance—especially in the works of Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, and Eldridge Cleaver. Baraka's display of homophobia is most interesting; he uses the word "faggot" as frequently as he writes, and with a multiplicity of disparaging meanings.

For example, he uses the term to characterize homosexual men as well as black leaders he despises. In the poem "Black Art," he refers to a black leader by saying "negroleader [sic] on the steps of the white house—kneeling between the sheriff's thighs negotiating coolly for his people" (Baraka, 1968,1). The scene is quite suggestive of a homosexual filial encounter and is meant to demean and degrade by placing the Negro leader in the position of the "faggot." Baraka goes further in "Civil Rights Poem" by calling "Roywilkins [sic] an eternal faggot" (Baraka, 1968, 140). Not only does Baraka traduce the Negro leader, but also he tries to make him less than a man by reducing him to the rejected status of the "faggot." Similarly, in the poem "Hegel," he recommends that homosexuals be executed: "I am not saying 'Let the State fuck its faggots,' only that no fag go unfucked, for purely impersonal reasons" (Baraka, 1968, 23).

Ron Simmons' "Some Thoughts on the Challenges Facing Black Gay Intellectuals" suggests, "Amiri Baraka is a fascinating study of homosexual-heterosexual conflict among African American males, for the tragic irony is that the "faggot" Baraka attacks so viciously is in reality himself" (Simmons, 1991, 218). This claim is supported by Baraka's



autobiographical accounts in *The Systems of Dante's Hell*.

He writes,

In Chicago I kept making the queer scene. Under the "El" with a preacher. . . held my head under the quilt. The first guy. . .spoke to me grinning and I said my name was Stephen Dedalus. . .One more guy and it was over. On the train, I wrote all this down. A journal now sitting in a tray on the top closet. . . The journal says "Am I like that?" (Baraka, 1971, 125)

Given this account, one might expect Baraka to express more sensitivity toward homosexuality, but to do so in America is read, most often, as the admittance of one's participation in a gay lifestyle. Hence, Baraka's fierce, spoken hatred of gayness is undoubtedly his attempt to maintain his position as spokesperson of the Black Arts movement.

Put simply, Simmons understands Baraka's homophobia as a need to survive. However, this explanation also renders him an excuse for such actions. Simmons writes, "Understanding Baraka's life turns our anger toward him to sympathy; indeed, pity" (Simmons, 1991, 220). However, this rendering of excuse further breeds homophobia because black gay men—then and now—become apathetic to homophobes, thereby perpetuating homophobia; consequently, Simmons, like Locke, becomes complicit not only in homophobia, but also in his own and all homosexual's subjugation. Simmons'

suggestion for black gay men to understand homophobia is indeed well meaning, but far too dangerous for black gay men because to suggest that black gay men must be gentle and understanding to homophobes and homophobia is like suggesting that black people must be gentle and understanding to racist whites as their lives get trampled by the insensitivity of racism. Homophobia, like racism, must be exposed as a volatile, violent evil which carries the potential to dismantle not only the black community but also the entire American social structure.

The homophobia in Haki Madhubuti's poem "Don't Cry, Scream" must necessarily be translated as violence. Madhubuti offers:

swung on a faggot  
 who politely scratched his ass in my presence.  
 he smiled broken teeth stained from his over-used  
 tongue, fisted-face.  
 teeth dropped in tune with raycharles singing  
 "yesterday." (Madhubuti, 1978, 61)

Poems like this are extremely dangerous because they encourage attacking gay men for very frivolous reasons. Madhubuti suggests that the poem's victim is a "faggot," but neglects to address the insecurity within the spokesperson that spawned such an attack. Scenarios like these can still be seen presently. Said simply, Baraka,

Madhubuti, and Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver provide basis for understanding homophobia as violence.

Cleaver, like Baraka, believed in combating racism as vehemently as he believed in combating and opposing homosexuality. For example, in Cleaver's "Notes on a Native Son," he states:

[M]any black homosexuals. . .are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they have to bear is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams but an increase in the unwinding of their nerves—though they redouble their efforts and intake of the white man's sperm. (Cleaver, 1968, 102)

Overwhelmingly, Cleaver assumes that black homosexuality is both a sickness and a supreme desire to have sex with white men—both assumptions are erroneous and narrow-minded.

Cleaver also makes a personal attack on black gay scholar and Civil Rights activist James Baldwin because of the latter's homosexuality. Cleaver refers to Baldwin as a "self-hating fag" (Cleaver, 1968, 103). Cleaver's sadistic attack on Baldwin not only illuminates the violence in homophobia but also makes such insidious homophobia justifiable. Concurrently, Rudolph P. Byrd asserts: "By positioning homosexuality as a discredited sexuality incompatible with Black manhood and corrosive of the goals

of Black revolution, Cleaver traduced Baldwin and legitimized homophobia in Black public discourse" (Byrd, 2001, 17). Baldwin's struggle as a black gay man and black gay scholar becomes more evident. Baldwin offers: "I think I know something about the American masculinity most men of my generation do not know because they have not been menaced by it in the way I have been" (Baldwin, 1985, 207). Baldwin cogently addresses the ill constructs of manhood, which heretofore usher in homophobia; he also expresses his expulsion from black manhood because of his sexual identity.

Further, Baldwin's "Here Be Dragons" examines the ways white racism and homophobia construct American manhood. He states:

The American ideal, then, of sexuality appears to be rooted in the American ideal of masculinity. This ideal has created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white. It is an ideal so paralytically infantile that it is virtually forbidden—as an unpatriotic act—that the American boy evolve into the complexity of manhood. (Baldwin, 1985, 208)

Baldwin's description of the complexity of manhood forces the constructs of manhood to be examined because it is this ill construction of manhood that can be seen in DuBois'

"Talented Tenth", Locke's *New Negro*, and Baraka's and Cleaver's homophobia and homophobic texts.

Ironically, the black church has long accepted—and quite often required—homophobia in its parishioners. While the black church has long been in existence, its presence was most widely felt during the Civil Rights Movement because many Civil Rights leaders, like Martin Luther King, Ralph David Abernathy, and Joseph Lowery, grew out of the black church and used it as the platform upon which to construct an American justice. During the 1960s, the black church and its leaders were supposedly fighting for black liberation, but, somehow, the black homosexual was excluded from that liberation. The Civil Rights movement was not only a movement in search of equality for black Americans, but also a movement attempting to reclaim a black identity. In *Salvation*, bell hooks offers, "Patriarchal black male leaders [of the Civil Rights/Black Power Movements] overtly expressed homophobia and encouraged other black people to join them" (hooks, 2001,189). Civil Rights activist Bayard Rustin's life exemplifies this claim. Rustin was indeed gay but was forced to conceal his sexual identity in order to maintain his public personae and to protect the strides of

the Civil Rights movement. Rudolph Byrd describes Rustin's dilemma in *Traps*:

Concerned that the demonstrations planned by King and Rustin for the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles in 1960 would jeopardize the candidacy of John F. Kennedy for president, [Adam Clayton] Powell threatened to announce that [Martin Luther] King and Rustin were involved in a homosexual relationship. Powell promised not to publicize this lie on the condition that King dismiss Rustin from his position in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as well as cancel the demonstrations. (Byrd, 2001, 16)

Rustin was indeed dismissed and replaced by his heterosexual colleague A. Philip Randolph. Although Rustin was allowed to participate in the subsequent Civil Rights efforts, he became invisible, and subsequently was eventually excluded, primarily because he was gay. Three years after his dismissal, Rustin almost invisibly planned the historic march on Washington, where King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech, which, ironically, swelters with the hope of liberation—for all people. However, King's compliance with Powell's egregious threat suggests that liberation for all was limited only to the heterosexual. Rustin's inability to challenge the homophobia within the Civil Rights movement was indicative of a black gay man torn between identities—he had to choose which identity was more important, black or gay, and, because of his unmaskable skin color, his only choice, presumably, was to

mask his sexual identity. Rustin's masking of his sexual identity may seem to be quite simple; however, the inability to express all of himself had to have been incredibly difficult, even debilitating. In "Blacks and Gays Healing the Great Divide", Barbara Smith addresses the hypocrisy of choosing one identity over the other:

Perhaps the most maddening question anyone can ask me is "Which do you put first: being black or being a woman, being black or being gay?" The underlying assumption is that I should prioritize one of my identities because one of them is actually more important than the rest or that I must arbitrarily choose one of them over the others for the sake of acceptance in one particular community. (Smith, 2000, 15)

However, black gays are forced either to choose an identity or create one, especially if they are active in the black church. Homophobia was prevalent throughout many black churches during the Civil Rights Movement and thereafter. Paradoxically, the church has always been buttressed by many homosexuals—gay men (and women) fill and direct its choirs and staff its multiple boards and auxiliaries; however, their admission of their homosexuality is strongly discouraged. If the black church posits itself as a place for acceptance, how can it then require (directly or indirectly) its gay members to conceal their sexual identity? The black church cannot do both;

hence, one is forced to conclude that the black church is as secular as any other social institution and lends itself to the laws and ideologies of the social system in which it exists. Horace Griffin further characterizes the lack of acceptance in present-day black Churches: "Gays and lesbians endure sermons that define them as sick people verbally and never expect to have their relationships recognized and affirmed verbally or in a ceremony" (Griffin, 2000, 117). Keith Boykin's *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America* offers an example of such a sermon that violently attacks black gay men. The setting of the sermon is not a typical Sunday, but a funeral for a black gay man who died of AIDS. Boykin retells the story:

The minister called for congregants to come to the altar if they wanted to dedicate their lives to Jesus. Finding that no one answered the call after several repeated requests, the minister told the organist to stop playing and decided to speak candidly to the congregation. Leaving the pulpit, he walked to the pews where the men were seated. 'Who in this church is saved? Raise your hands if you've been saved.' David [another black gay man and partner of the deceased] raised his hand. The minister asked, 'How could you be saved? Son, the Bible says that homosexuality is an abomination in the eyes of the Lord. Vaughn [the deceased] is on his way to Hell, and you will be too if you don't change your ways.' (Boykin, 1996, 124)

So it seems that even in death, black gay men are not sacred—not even in the black Church. This vituperous display is merely one example of the homophobia expressed



from the pulpit of the black church. However, many black preachers spread vociferous messages both in and outside of the church.

Unfortunately, the black family often mimics the church's example in how it treats gay members. Many black gay men have been brutally beaten, neglected, and/or banished from the family because they were gay or perceived to be gay. Men who substantiate this claim are singers Little Richard and Sylvester, transgender actress Lady Chablis, and minister Bishop Gene Robinson to name a few. Lady Chablis is one of the foremost examples of a child who was menaced by homophobia. She grew up in Quincy, Florida in the 1960's and was then known as Benjamin Edward Knox. In her memoir, *"Hiding my Candy,"* she recalls the triumph of growing up young, black, and gay and the many beatings he received because of his homosexuality. Lady Chablis offers sadly,

For Mama and my stepdaddy, the shame factor of having a li'l girl with candy was too great to bear. And for this reason alone, I still assume, they took to exorcising the demon seed from my very soul with the fiercest lashings a person could possibly be capable of giving to another. 'Get into the bathroom and take off y' clothes! GET BUCK NEKKID NOW! 'Cause I'm gonna whip y' colored ass!' Sometimes just my fem'ine presence alone was enough to provoke her rage. It was all very routine: Mama instructed what my stepdaddy performed. They's send me first to the bathroom and make me strip. Then they'd take three long branches

from a backyard oak tree then they'd braid to make a 'switch' the length of a yard stick. The whole neighborhood could hear me screaming and hollering at 'em as they whipped the shit outta me. As the blood dripped down my ass, I'd be taken to the back porch and tied round one of them skinny beams that connected the porch to the foundation of the out-house.  
(Chablis, 1996, 56)

The beatings that Chablis endured are extremely reminiscent of slave beatings. Sadly and diabolically, the grasp of homophobia reaches children extremely early, to thereby truncate their sexual identity long before it is cemented, and in many cases it firmly strangles them, leaving them with only enough breath to choose a false, compulsory heterosexual identity or death.

Suicide for those gay men who cannot conceal their sexuality seems easier to achieve than assimilation. Bishop Beam is one such gay man who could not choose to conceal his sexual identity; consequently, his family chose to alienate him as a child. At age ten, the alienation became so intense and absolute that Beam attempted suicide. His youthful letter reads: "Mommy and Daddy, I don't know what to do. I don't think you love me anymore, and I don't know how to make you love me. I don't know how to change me" (Beam quoted in Boykin, 1996, 134). Beam's suicide attempt was foiled by his father who luckily found him before it was too late. Beam was fortunately rescued but so many

other black gay men are not and even more are menaced all under the auspices of homophobia.

In Boykin's *One More River To Cross*, the Reverend James Sykes offers a venomous opposition to homosexuals. For example, when Sykes was asked his opinion about an anti-gay Ku Klux Klan rally, he responded, "If I knew that was the only reason that they were there, I would be there with them" (quoted in Boykin, 1996, 157). Sykes' statement is very interesting because it depicts a black preacher who is so committed to the hatred of homosexuals that he concurs with the Ku Klux Klan—an organization whose primary aim is black genocide. Sykes' assertions and allegiance to white heterosexism are further evidence of the relationship of black and white racism and homophobia and how the very combination of the two works to dismantle the black community.

So deadly rooted in hatred, homophobia thrives like a cancerous plague, divesting and devouring all who allow its consumption. Black people have become its prey, have been and are being devoured, and the vestige of their identity divested.

## CHAPTER 4

### WE SHALL OVERCOME: BLACK GAY MEN MOVING TOWARD [A BLACK GAY] IDENTITY

Sadly, both the Civil Rights and Gay Liberation Movements of the 1960s fought against discrimination, while both discriminated against black gays. In other words, the great parallel between the two mutually exclusive movements is that there was no place for the black gay man (or woman) in either movement. Black gays' exclusion from both movements is extremely problematic because it perpetuates both homophobia and racism; it also prohibits the black gay man from inclusion on any level in black male kinship groups, thereby increasing the probability of a bifurcated identity.

Yet Huey P. Newton, former Supreme Commander of the Black Panther Party, was one of the first leaders to embrace black gays. In his compelling "A Letter From Huey To The Revolutionary Brothers And Sisters About The Women's Liberation And Gay Liberation Movement", Newton suggests:

We haven't said much about the homosexual at all and we must relate to the homosexual movement because it is a real movement. And I know through reading and

through my life experience, my observation, that homosexuals are not given freedom and liberty by anyone in this society. Maybe they might be the most oppressed people in the society. (Newton, 2001, 282)

Newton's observation as a black leader of the time is edifying; however, the black homosexual still remained unseen by the Gay Liberation Movement of the 1960s. The Gay Liberation Movement was seen by many people of the time and currently as a movement by and for white gay men. This idea is not far-fetched because white gay men were at the focal point of the movement. Conversely, white gay women were not seen as central to the discussion of gay rights because white gay women had long been involved in the Women's Liberation Movement; hence, the Gay Liberation Movement was aimed primarily at liberating white men. Martha Nussbaum's *The Rise of a Gay and Lesbian Movement* illustrates this assertion. Nussbaum offers, "Gay liberation, when we get right down to it, is the struggle for (white) gay men to achieve approval for the only thing that separates them from the 'Man'—their sexual preference" (Nussbaum, 1995, 99). This assertion is extremely important because it demonstrates the exclusivity of the Gay Liberation movement. Nussbaum clearly articulates that there was a gender disparity in the ranks of the Gay Liberation Movement; however, she neglects to depict the race

disparity therein. James Baldwin, however, observed a displacement of the black gay man, and in *One More River To Cross: Black and Gay in America*, Baldwin offers, "The gay world as such is no more prepared to accept black people than anywhere else in society. It's a very hermetically sealed world with very unattractive features, including racism" (quoted in Boykin, 1996, 228). Proving Baldwin's assertion, Andrew Sullivan, the white gay male editor of the *New Republic*, states in the *Advocate* that,

The truth is, our position is far worse than that of any ethnic minority or heterosexual women. Every fundamental Civil Right has already been granted to these groups: The issues that they discuss now involve nuances of affirmative action, comparable pay, and racial quotas. Gay people, however, still live in the South of the '50'S. . . (Sullivan quoted in Smith, 1991, 17)

Sullivan unearths the very racist beliefs that much of the Gay Liberation Movement echoes. Further, Sullivan illumines the racism within the Gay Liberation Movement because he separates ethnic minorities as if the two cannot be one in the same. If for no other reason, the Gay Liberation Movement can be seen as racist because it primarily excluded all who were not white. Moreover, In *One More River to Cross*, Keith Boykin suggests:

Much of the connection between gay and white results from gay racism toward nonwhites. This prejudice takes on many forms, but the most common complaints involve

blacks or other nonwhites who feel they are excluded, exploited, or patronized by the dominant white gay community. (Boykin, 1996, 214)

In the 1960s the initial steps toward community that black gays made was through creating social outlets. The "White only" signs were removed from establishments by law. However, many white proprietors and patrons alike maintained the spirit of de facto segregation. Boykin asserts, "The social exclusion of blacks is the most obvious and most common form of gay racism practiced by the white community" (Boykin, 1996, 215). Consequently, black gay men began to embark upon their own social outlets, nightclubs, and places for meeting each other. However, the newly founded nightclubs were not typically black owned; either the nightclubs were white owned and primarily frequented by blacks, or the nightclubs were white owned and offered to blacks only one night of the week wherein to gather. Both the former and the latter are problematic because neither provides a true break from a white gay community that black gays were hoping to flee. Although this combination of white bar owner to black patron is slightly reminiscent of the master-slave relationship, it is under those very nightclub roofs that black gay men created a multi-faceted organization that was a movement in

itself. Merging the aspects of the black family and the comradery and social networks of the black fraternity, black gay men created social clubs, which are formally and affectionately known as "Houses." Explored in the 1991 documentary "Paris Is Burning," the House dates back to 1977 with the founding of the "House of LaBeija."

The House of Labeija began as a place of refuge for young black and Latino gay men who had been expelled from their families because they were gay. Subsequently, the refuge morphed into a social group, and members of the various Houses competed at nightclubs and balls sometimes for money, but more often for prize trophies. The ball is a formal competition comprised of a host of categories ranging from best runway, to prettiest face, to an original dance created by these black men called "vogueing."

Membership was extended to those who could compete in one of the many categories and to those who could, behind the scenes, lend support to the organization. For example, if an aspirant could not compete in one of the categories but could design costumes or perform any other much-needed function specific to the House, then membership was granted. Legendary House mothers such as Pepa LaBeija, Octavia St.Laurent, and Willi Ninja all agree that the



House was extremely beneficial to their House children. Similarly, House children, such as Kim Pendavis and Venus Xtravaganza agree that their respective Houses were all they had and the House members became their only family. Consequently, the birth of the House tradition can be seen as transformative in the lives of many black gay men. The House was somewhat inclusive and much needed for many black gay men at the time—and quite arguably, today—but it certainly had its shortcomings.

Although one of the foremost examples of a largely black gay community and a Black Gay Movement, the House movement was unable to grow into an entity that vehemently fought for social change and liberation for its members because its vision was simply to be a place of refuge and comradery—not to challenge the homophobia within the black community or to challenge the homophobia and racism in American society at large. Such a quest might be too much to ask of those few who were willing to sacrifice their lives to love the black rejected. However, a hiding place alone is not a sufficient defense against a social ill such as homophobia because as long as it grows, it will ultimately infest even the refuges built to withstand its affront.

Conversely, there were several other groups founded in the 1980s geared more toward social change and black gay liberation and less toward social pleasure. In *Brother to Brother*, Essex Hemphill suggests:

What is most clear for black gay men is this: We have to do for ourselves now, and for each other *now*, what no one has ever done for us. We have to be there for one another and trust less the adhesions of kisses and semen to bind us. Our sure guarantee of survival is that we create our own self-determination. (Hemphill, 1991, xx; emphasis in original)

One such group that manifests Hemphill's vision of self-determination is an organization called Gay Men of African Descent. Gay Men of African Descent offers as their description:

Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD) was founded in 1986 by the Reverend Charles Angel, a Pentecostal minister who recognized the need for African-American, Latino, Continental African and Caribbean gay men in New York City to support one another and unite in the fight against AIDS, homophobia, and racism. In 1990, GMAD incorporated in the state of New York as a non-profit, 501 (c) (3) organization, whose mission and role in the five boroughs of New York City is to provide quality and culturally-sensitive services in four areas: education, advocacy, health and wellness promotion and social support. (Gay Men Of African Descent, 2003)

Gay Men of African Descent is an excellent example of a Black Gay Movement, and its members are extremely active in New York. The organization provides much of the care that is needed by black gay men living with AIDS and HIV. Further, the organization is very active in trying to unite

both homosexual and heterosexual men of African Descent. For example, the group was one of the largest participating organizations in the 1995 Million Man March on Washington. Gay Men of African Descent can also be seen as revolutionary because they call themselves men of African descent who are gay, which is an identity inconceivable by many black nationalists.

Both aforementioned organizations are examples of attempts by black gay men at liberation and community that have emerged heretofore. On the surface, both are well-meaning and have accomplished a great deal, but one wonders why the two organizations, and organizations like them, do not intersect as a further attempt at liberation and community? One can infer that two reasons are classism and genderism. Somewhere along the way, there was a shift in what characterized a black gay man, yet not every black gay man was a representative of this shift. For example, the majority of the black gay men described in "Paris is Burning" are openly gay, working class, effeminate (by societal standards), and, typically, high school was their highest level of education. However, a new example of the black gay man has been conceived, one buttressed by many of the members of Gay Men of African Descent. This newer black

gay man is not always openly gay, but rather selective in whom he is open to, middle class, typically considered masculine, and more often than not, has a college education. In essence, this shift is reminiscent of Alain Locke's *New Negro*, which hopes to shed the myth of "the Old Negro who had long become more myth than a man" (Locke, 1925, 47). Locke's vision was for the new Negro to be seen as superior to the old Negro, and similarly, this newer black gay man hopes to be seen as superior to the predecessor. The hope of the newer black gay man to be seen as better than his predecessor depicts classisms and genderism struggles most clearly. For example, the newer black gay man has increased possibility of a higher social class level than his predecessor, which gives him a feeling of superiority, and, if masculine, he can enjoy heterosexual privilege simply by appearing heterosexual, thereby sharing in the oppression of the effeminate black gay man.

This contemporary silent movement is fatal to the possibility of black gay identity because its secret members, in fact, do not want to be identified as gay. E. Lynn Harris' first novel, *Invisible Life* (1994), illustrates this silent movement with the onset of the

black bisexual man who identifies himself as "Down Low" or "DL", and is opposed to anything that is gay. Traci Carrol examines Harris' novels in "Invisible Sissy: The Politics of Masculinity in African American Bisexual Narrative." She maintains:

By filtering bisexual experience through the generic conventions of the passing novels, Harris's novel expands the definition of masculinity to include bisexual practices at the same time that they explore the difficulties of defining bisexuality as a mode of sexual and political identification. The concept of passing links African American and gay literary traditions through their common reliance upon the notion of a fundamental unitary identity, a truth whose denial offers myriad social benefits at the cost of political compromise and constant fear of exposure. (Carrol, 1991, 181)

Thus, as Carrol articulates, passing and enjoying the social benefits of heterosexuality become more important than embracing a socially-rejected gay identity. Geoffrey Giddings further characterizes this shift in black gay identity. Ironically, the title of his essay is "Fear of a Gay Identity" in which he reflects on the first time he acknowledged his sexual identity to a friend. Giddings states,

She said she had suspected I was gay and that she had been afraid I would have been offended if she asked. She was right; I would have been offended because I believed being thought of as gay meant I was being considered less than whole. I even felt ashamed that she had suspected me of being gay. (Giddings, 1991, 18)

Giddings' statements merely echo the statements of many men like him who in the 1980s and 1990s were, or had become, ashamed of what being black and gay meant. Giddings also exposes what is here proposed as a new movement—a silent movement toward rough and overt masculinity. Indeed, both homosexual and heterosexual men have been on a quest for manic masculinity since the beginning of time, or at the very least, since the beginning of barbarianism, but it is within the black gay community that this phenomenon is now so vast that it must be seen as new because many men like Giddings are trying to escape what was old. It is posited as a new movement because it allows no room for anything but masculinity, which simultaneously removes and oppresses so many members of the black gay community. The researcher also suggests that an official, legitimate, organized movement for black gays has not taken place, and the evidence of its absence can be seen in the continued bifurcation of black gay identity. Further, it could appear that a movement has, in fact, happened because black homosexuality is more visible. However, the higher visibility of black homosexuality is as indicative to a formal black gay movement as a black mayor in a southern city is indicative to an ending of racism in that city. If

black gay men shall overcome, then they must first identify who "they" are—because it is a holistic identity that will ignite not just a movement, but indeed a revolution.

## CHAPTER 5

### WE WEAR THE MASK: AFRICAN-AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY GAY MALE IDENTITIES

*"We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes"*  
—Paul Laurence Dunbar

In his poem, "We Wear the Mask," Paul Laurence Dunbar dares to tell the world that black people adorn a repugnant mask simply as a means of survival. Similarly, contemporary African-American gay men wear many masks as a means of survival, but beneath the mask lies no vestige of a healthy identity. Contemporary African-American gay men willingly adorn their mask "that grins and lies" because a history of racism and homophobia has robbed them of the possibility of self-esteem and self love, thus, a mask perfectly accessorizes their self-hatred. Yet, the construction of the mask cannot singularly be accredited to racism and homophobia because it is also constructed rather viviparously by these contemporary men. In other words, contemporary African-American gay men are complicit and in



many cases agents in the same homophobia that oppresses them. Consequently, the mask is willingly worn, and simultaneously there is a loss of identity. The problem heretofore for black gay men was maintaining a hierarchy of identities—being black first or gay first. The problem now is that contemporary African-American gay men do not want to identify at all with being gay. Consequently, they have created a new hierarchy of identities or labels to substitute their sexual identity. The labeling process further perpetuates stereotypes. In his "Here be Dragons," James Baldwin observes the workings of labels. He states:

But once you have discerned the meaning of a label, it may seem to define you for others, but it does not have the power to define you to yourself. The condition that is now called gay was then called queer. The operative word was faggot and, later, pussy, but those epithets really had nothing to do with the question of sexual preference: You were being told simply that you had no balls. (Baldwin, 2001, 211)

Those labels that Baldwin highlighted in the 1960s have not diminished, but have actually flourished today and have created such offspring as "Down-low", "butch-queen", "fem-queen", and "cunt" (common street language in contemporary black gay settings).

Of the many labels employed by contemporary African-American gay men, "Down Low" is overwhelmingly the most

identity, to those men who are otherwise convinced that they are heterosexual and only have sex with men. The former is the result of a silent movement toward masculinity—a movement that rejects anything female or feminine. This movement toward masculinity declares war on anything remotely feminine because femininity is seen as a repugnant weakness in men. In "A Very Straight Gay: Masculinity, Homosexual Experience, And The Dynamics of Gender", R.W. Connel suggests:

In the dynamics of hegemony in contemporary Western masculinity, the relation between heterosexual and homosexual men is central, carrying a heavy symbolic freight. To many people, homosexuality is a negation of masculinity, and homosexual men must be effeminate. Given that assumption, antagonism toward homosexual men may be used to define masculinity, a stance Herek(1986)summed up in the proposition that 'to be a man in contemporary American society is to be homophobic—that is, to be hostile toward gay men particularly'.(Connel, 1992, 736)

Further, the scheme for contemporary African-American gay men is (1)to be as close to manic masculinity and sexism as possible in order thereby to escape homophobia from heterosexuals—black and non-black alike; (2) to then be or act homophobic as a means of acceptance, and (3) to participate in the hierarchy of men as Connel suggests. Said differently, many contemporary African-American gay men believe that they must be homophobic and bifurcate

their sexual identity from their black male identity in order to be accepted and to maintain a high ranking in the hierarchy of men. It is through this logic that statements like, "I can't stand no faggot ass nigger" can be heard from the mouth of a black gay man, even in an all-gay environment.

The contemporary African-American bisexual man who considers himself "Down Low" is a most peculiar creature because of his ability to lead a double life. However, the lines between gay and bisexual have become extremely blurred. Though bisexual implies attraction to both sexes, many black gay men wear bisexual masks in an effort to enjoy the heterosexual privileges the bisexual man enjoys—not a new phenomenon, but the preponderance of current cases is certainly phenomenal. Additionally, many contemporary African-American gay men consider themselves neither gay nor homosexual and lead heterosexual lives while having sex with men. This supposedly heterosexual man is grouped with neither bisexual nor gay men because he cannot admit his sexual identity even to himself. These are only three of the eight identities found among African American gay men in Atlanta, Georgia, as a result of my recent survey.

The federal observance of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday symbolizes freedom to many African-Americans, and similarly, many African-American gay men observe the holiday as the commencement for black gay pride celebrations across the United States. One of the biggest ceremonies takes place in Atlanta, Georgia, which is viewed as black gay capital by many African-Americans. However, this capital is home to very few openly gay African-American men, and likewise, many of the men who attend this black gay pride do not identify themselves as gay. I constructed a survey in an attempt to determine the extent of identity fragmentation among African-American gay men. The following is the presentation of the collected data.

Of the one hundred and ten men willing to complete the survey, ninety-nine percent currently have sex with men (see Table 1)

Table 1

## Sexual Relations With Men

Have had sex with men	Have not had sex with men
109	1
N=110	

"Gay" and "virgin" are not typically used in the same sentence. Many believe that being gay is merely defined by sex, as if the only way to understand one's sexual

attraction is through the act of sex. However, one respondent between the age of eighteen and twenty-two views himself as a gay virgin—hence, the first three questions which asks about sexual practices were all responded to with “no,” so he considered not completing the entire survey because he had not had sex. He was encouraged to complete the survey, however, which he did, and after he finished, the researcher asked him, as the devil’s advocate, how he knew he was gay without having had sex. He coyly responded, “people always ask me that, but I just know. And nobody ever asked my twin sister how or why she knows she’s straight”(quoted in anonymous interview). In *One of the Children*, William G. Hawkeswood offers:

Meaning is more important than actual sexual behavior in the development of homosexual identity. Actual sexual experience with other males is neither a necessary nor a sufficient factor in labeling oneself as homosexual, and sexual relations with women do not necessarily lead to a ‘bisexual’ or ‘heterosexual’ self-definition. ‘Doing’ does not necessarily eventuate in ‘being’. (Hawkeswood, 1996, 11)

Both points are very well taken because the same concept is not applied to heterosexuals. Additionally, the perpetuation of the idea that gay negates virgin is problematic because it assumes and suggests that heterosexuality is natural, consequently making homosexuality unnatural, which thereby creates many problems

for those men attempting to forge a non-heterosexual identity, and encourages them to continue to engage in sex with both men and women.

Suggesting that one must have sex to be homosexual also creates a very gruesome sense of sexual prowess in African-American gay men. A false sense of experimenting with sex to discover their identity subsequently allows them to digress into a state of arbitrarily frequent sex, thus, an increase in dangerous sexual practices, an increase in sexually transmitted diseases among black men and women, and, overwhelmingly, a loss of sexual identity. Indeed, rampant sex allows these men to bifurcate their identity because the only thing that becomes apparent to them is the need to produce an orgasm and not the homo sex in which they are engaging. It then becomes plausible for one to say, "I'm not gay, I just mess around" because he is not forced to lay claim to the act or the homosexual behavior. However, the gay virgin's response was echoing something much deeper: it echoed a need to call all men who have either sexual attractions to men or who have sex with men "gay" because giving them various options actually causes more dissent among black gay men. Further, if a man has had any type of sex with another man, he must also be

seen as gay or homosexual because giving him the option to be heterosexual in light of his sexual experiences affords him heterosexual privilege. This causes a great disconnect between gay men because this option will not be extended to every gay man, and those men who will be offered the option will not want to be associated with those who will not.

Moreover, eight percent of the respondents admit that they no longer have sex with men, and such an admission exempts them from being gay. However, they must be seen as gay, or at the very least bisexual, because allowing them to identify as straight further perpetuates heterosexism. For example, thirty-three percent of the respondents currently have sex with women and twenty-seven percent have sex with both men and women; however, only nine percent identify themselves as bisexual. Similarly, seventeen percent identify themselves as straight and two percent identified themselves as down-low and straight; yet, they all have sex with men. Gay, of course, was not a possible sexual identity for them. However, the two percent who identify themselves as down-low and straight are admitting in a very miniscule way that they are more than just heterosexual. When questioned further, one respondent retorted, "I am 'DL' when I am trying to get with a nigga'

and straight when I'm trying to get with a ho' (his term)" (see Table 2). His reasoning suggests that his sexual identity is based on sex and with which gender the act occurs, which seems to substantiate an earlier claim that misappropriated sexual prowess precludes sexual identity.

Table 2

*Self-Sexual Identification*

Self-Sexual Identification	Number and Percent of Respondents	
	Number	Percent
Gay	39	37%
Straight	19	18%
Down-Low Bisexual	15	13%
Bisexual	10	9%
Homosexual	8	7%
Down-Low	7	6%
Down-Low Gay	7	6%
Down-Low Homosexual	4	3%
N= 110 Total	110	100%

Additionally, this same respondent exempts himself from a gay identity simply because he can. He was approached on Cypress Street, a boulevard in Atlanta silently designated for male prostitutes, and many of the male prostitutes also exempted the respondent and other men like him from a gay identity because they saw his behavior as just sex. At the same time, seven percent identify themselves as homosexual. The aim of these men appears to be to avoid the social stigma of living and acknowledging ones own self as gay, which can be interpreted as internalized homophobia.

Conversely, six percent simply identify themselves as



down-low. These men, like many of the other men, do not see the correlation between down-low and something inhuman; down-low not only characterizes them and their behavior as dreadful, but also further dehumanizes them because it diminishes their identity. Only forty-four percent of all respondents suggests that there is a divergence between gay, homosexual, and down-low identities, which suggests that the majority of these men, though not openly gay, subconsciously view their sexual identity as gay in some shape or form.

On the other hand, fifty-eight percent identify themselves as masculine while only twelve percent identify themselves as effeminate, and thirty-four identify themselves as both masculine and effeminate. Many of the men who identified themselves as both masculine and effeminate would be deemed effeminate by societal standards. Those respondents who identify themselves as both masculine and effeminate do so to maintain a level of heterosexuality. Maintaining a level of heterosexuality affords these men heterosexual privilege and, in many cases, an escape from homophobia (see table 3).

Table 3

## Masculine Versus Feminine Characteristics

Characteristics	Number and Percent of Respondents	
	Number	Percent
Identify as Masculine	58	54%
Identify as Effeminate	14	9%
Identify as Both	<u>38</u>	<u>37%</u>
N=110 Total	110	100%

Simply put, these men see heterosexuality, maleness, and masculinity as a sort of three-piece suit, and in order to be in vogue or acceptable, they must model the entire oppressive outfit. Moreover, masculine and effeminate polarities among contemporary African-American gay men appear to be the deciding factor in identifying one as gay. Effeminate gay men express more difficulty in appearing heterosexual; therefore, a gay identity is the only identity allowed to them.

Facing oppression from society in general and from a black gay community in particular, those who are effeminate must either learn to be masculine or live as out-casts. This claim is substantiated by the large number of men who identify themselves as masculine, as well as those who argue that they are both masculine and effeminate. The effeminate gay male is lowest in the hierarchy of men, and arguably the most oppressed. Though oppressed, the

effeminate gay man can also be equally as oppressive to women, which perpetuates sexism—which subsequently, produces homophobia.

For example, if an effeminate gay man can appear less feminine in certain instances, he can in fact be as oppressive and sexist to women as a heterosexual or masculine gay man. An effeminate black gay colleague suggested that he was not sexist, following a statement like, "black women in the south need male leadership and they like it." He further contends that black gay men who are not completely certain about their sexuality "should continue to have sex with women until they get tired of it, but while having sex with women they must have sex with men to compare" (from an anonymous interview). These are very sexist and patriarchal statements. Indeed, he is a black effeminate gay male, but he certainly possesses the ability to appear both heterosexual and masculine, both of which provide him with heterosexual applause and enjoyable hierarchy over women.

Further, effeminate gay men must not revel in their oppression, nor revel in sexism, but must vehemently challenge the same sexism that leads to their oppression. Connel suggests,

Some groups of openly gay men emphasize masculinity as part of their cultural style. Closeted gay men enjoy the general advantages of masculine gender and even effeminate gay men draw economic benefits from the overall subordination of women. (Connel, 1992, 737)

This finding relates directly to the problematic construction of manhood in America. If one expresses masculinity, he is not hated as vociferously for his homosexuality as his effeminate counterpart. Indeed, this loop-hole in American manhood characterizes sexism, but it also characterizes a foremost reason why down-low exists as a sexual identity. Sexism and heterosexism practiced by both heterosexual and homosexuals are at the root of the many problems gay men face in forging an identity. A heterosexual female colleague always asks, "why don't they just come out?" However, her question is typically preceded by a very homophobic or heterosexist statement like "I hate bisexuals" or "I typically get along better with masculine gay men", and she is informed that it is comments like these that prohibit African-American gay men from asserting their sexual identity. This point is especially highlighted because many African-American women are the victims of men who lead double lives, but what goes unsaid is that many African-American women are key in destroying the possibility of African-American gay men coming out or

identifying as gay because of their own homophobia and the way in which they express it.

Moreover, only twenty percent of the men surveyed are open about their sexual identity to everyone. All of the men in that twenty percent category identify themselves as either gay, homosexual, or bisexual, and again, sixty-three percent of these men identify themselves as effeminate; the remaining thirty-seven percent identify themselves as both masculine and effeminate.

The ability to be open about one's sexual identity is important to a healthy maturation, and, sadly, only two respondents contend that they can be open about their sexual identity at all times. Only eleven respondents are open to their family about their sexual identity, but as one respondent pointed out "who is family for a punk?. . . right, other punks." Thus, the family that these men may be open to about their sexual identity may in fact not be their biological one. Consequently, it is plausible to suggest that they are not truly open about their sexual identity. Additionally, a married respondent offered, "everybody in my family knows." His statement seemed odd, but not uncommon, because many of the respondents, especially those who considered themselves straight, very

nonchalantly and simultaneously spoke of wives, families, and sex with men. Such responses suggest that it is possible for the black family to be aware of one's homosexuality and be accepting, but it is also uncommon. It is also questionable as to how accepting this particular respondent's family is of his homosexual identity because he is married. Essex Hemphill speaks of the need for acceptance of the homosexual by the black family in "Does Your Mama Know About Me?" Hemphill sees the acceptance of the black homosexual by the black family as essential to the existence of the black community. He states:

We[black gay men] are a wandering tribe that needs to go home before home is gone. We should not continue standing in line to be admitted into spaces that don't want us there. We cannot continue to exist without clinics, politics organizations, human services and cultural institutions that we create to support, sustain, and affirm us. Our mothers and fathers are waiting for us. Our sisters and brothers are waiting. Our communities are waiting for us to come home. They need our love, our talents and skills, and we need theirs. (Hemphill, 2001, 300)

Hemphill's recommendation falls upon deaf ears, most often it seems, because contemporary African-American gay men are still overwhelmingly not received by their heterosexual counterparts. Further, six percent said that they were simply afraid to profess a gay identity, which is quite understandable due to a tacit historical context.

Similarly, nine percent contend that it's too hard being both black and gay. Both admissions suggest that the combination of their double minority status and a gruesome historical context are problematic for a black gay man forging a contemporary African-American gay identity.

Further, five percent of the respondents are not open about their sexual identity simply because it is more difficult to obtain male mates after acknowledging a gay identity. Similarly, seven percent suggested that they were not open about their sexual identity because they are "real men." Since the black family and church are typically synonymous entities among African-Americans, a parallel between the four percent who are not open about their sexual identity merely because of their families and the two percent who cannot be open because of religion is perfectly logical. Michael Eric Dyson realizes this disparity between the black church and African-American gay men as he states, "In the main, a theology of eroticism must be developed to free black Christian sexuality from guilty repression or gutless promiscuity" (Dyson, 2001, 325). Dyson's theology of eroticism is suggesting that black churches begin to embrace the multitude of erotic feelings that many black church-goers possess, thereby

decreasing the exclusion of black homosexuals from black churches. The establishment of Dyson's poignant proposal in every black church—Christian and non-Christian—might plausibly end much of the separation between homosexuals and heterosexuals in the black community and likewise the black family.

Additionally, twenty-four percent of the respondents agree that all of the reasons listed in the survey were grounds for not professing their sexual identity. However, all but one of the men agree that none of the aforementioned reasons presented in the survey prohibit them from being open about their sexual identity. They identify themselves as either straight or down-low; consequently, they do not see a need to be open about their sexual identity. The one respondent who did not identify himself as straight or down-low, identified himself as openly gay all the time. However, ninety-eight percent of the respondents all agree that they cannot be open about their sexual identity at all times. Similarly, seventy-one percent of the respondents agree that their sexual identity affects them in every facet of their lives, e.g., the black community, the black church, the black gay community, work, and school.



Further, age played an interesting role in survey responses. While it seemed like ageing would define maturity level and self-acceptance, it did not because those who accepted a gay identity most frequently were between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. Though this respondent age group was not the highest in number surveyed, their responses were most affirmative in regards to accepting a gay identity (see Table 4).

Table 4

*Ages of Respondents*

Ages	Number	Percentage of Respondents
18-22	21	19%
23-27	20	18%
28-32	22	20%
33-37	20	18%
37-40	14	13%
41-and Over	<u>13</u>	<u>12%</u>
N=110 Total	110	100%

Ages twenty-three through thirty-seven seem to be an extremely virile time in a man's life, one in which external validations also seem to be more important than self validation. Age twenty-three is approximately the time most of these men become independent. Many respondents from this age group suggested that they had just graduated from college or were fast approaching a college graduation, which for many is a time of ambiguity. Some suggested that they had recently obtained corporate jobs, and others

suggested that they had recently joined the military, all of which suggest that their environmental factors prohibit their acceptance or acknowledgement of a gay identity. There were other respondents of this age group who suggested that they were thugs, and the urban culture reinforced by hip-hop music certainly has not embraced homosexuals. Many of the respondents who were between ages twenty-eight and thirty-two were married to women, which makes it implausible for them to identify themselves as gay.

Similarly, the age group thirty-three to thirty-seven was largely comprised of men who were married and/or identified themselves as straight. It appears that most of the men surveyed wanted families comprised of wives and children between ages twenty-five and thirty-five, and also still exhibited a need to enjoy a level of social acceptance. On the contrary, many of the men over thirty-seven were accepting of a gay identity, which appears that as they aged they became more accepting of their sexual identity. However, most of the men over thirty-seven who identify themselves as gay also identify themselves as effeminate, which suggest that being straight was less of an option for them. Moreover, the majority of the men who

identified themselves as straight were between the ages of twenty-eight and thirty-six, which are also the age groups containing most of the men who were still having sex with women and who were married. The men who identified themselves as bisexual were sprinkled throughout the various age groups; however, most of the bisexuals were between ages twenty-three and thirty-two (see Table 2).

Moreover, age seems to impact sexual identity acceptance or rejection because identity is related to levels of maturity. However, the aforementioned statistics suggest that the foremost cause in sexual identity acceptance or rejection in contemporary African-American gay men is social factors, which may or may not be related to age. Said differently, it is social factors such as race, race awareness, economics, class, gender polarities, family, religion, profession, education, and environment that determine the level of sexual identity acceptance or rejection by African-American gay men, both past and present. Furthermore, the suffocating spaces that the aforementioned social factors locks these men into are debilitating and further hinder their development over an entire life span, which, thereby, makes it impossible for them to sustain healthy lives.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

*"What good do you words do, if they can't understand you. . . "*  
*-Erykah Badu*

This study has added to the discipline of African-American Studies/Black Studies by offering a new lens through which to examine black men and their constructs of manhood, masculinity, and sexuality. The discipline heretofore, has left a great disconnect between black heterosexuals and homosexuals, and this research attempted to re-connect the two and dismantle the idiosyncratic tools by which such disconnect is built. This thesis examined a select group of contemporary men, in a contemporary "gay mecca" at a contemporary gay event, and allowed these men to tell the world what they think about sexual identity and how they identify themselves.

A major discovery of this research is that in the black community a man can be both homosexual and heterosexual simultaneously without being considered bisexual.

Many black gay men live dual lives, identifying themselves as either gay or straight whenever convenient. Seeing only effeminacy and public declarations of drama as gay, many black men do not identify themselves as gay, but engage in homo sex. Further, there are several newly constructed sexual identities in the black community ranging from gay to down-low and straight. These new identity titles have been conceived to escape the weight of a homosexual identity; however, they give birth to more homophobia. This thesis also found that a lack of scholarly research on black homosexuals and homophobic writings by black scholars have also increased internalized homophobia in both black gay men and the black community. Subsequently, the impact of homophobia on the identity formation of black men appears to be very great. Proof of such an assertion lies in chapters one through five. Black men are forced to arrive at an identity outside homosexuality in order to be seen as a man, as chapters three and five articulate. This exploration of sexual identity in African-American men has found that because of a history of homophobia and a lack of a formal movement toward a black gay identity, contemporary African-American gay men bifurcate their identity. This research provided evidence for the many reasons why

contemporary African-American gay men bifurcate their identity to maintain membership in the black community as well as in society at large. Similarly, this study examined the self-hatred within black gay men and their compliance in homophobia, and further, their own oppression. In *Salvation*, bell hooks offers "In his autobiography, *Black Boy*, [Richard] Wright dared to tell the world that he believed dehumanization had happened to many black folks, that ongoing racist genocide had left us damaged, forever wounded in the space where we would know love" (hooks, 2001, xx). Further, it is this absence of love and acceptance that has separated the black community and black gays from each other. The future for homosexuality in the black community does not look very promising because the black community is still so largely entrenched in homophobia and many black homosexuals are not planning for a future of homosexuality. Simply put, many black homosexuals are not planning to be homosexual in the future either because they see their lives taken by homophobic hate crimes, death by illness, or they are planning to disguise themselves as heterosexual. The latter is becoming quite popular among contemporary African-American gay men; many survey respondents suggested that they plan to be

straight in the future because "Being gay ain't right."

Statements like these illuminate the current increase of homophobia in the black community and in black gay men.

Moreover, many black gay men believe that they cannot profess a gay identity unless they are surrounded by other black gay men or unless they have a role model of some sort. While there is a need for more black scholars and celebrities who are gay to acknowledge their sexual identity as forthright as their heterosexual counterparts do, there is a greater need for black gay men to acknowledge tenaciously who they are without the need for external validation. Clearly, if a gay black man awaits the public embracing of same-gender love as sign that it is now safe to love himself, his wait might consume the rest of his days in America. Similarly, for many black gays there is no sense of home or belonging to a community. In *One More River To Cross*, Keith Boykin asserts:

Blacks and gays have much to learn about each other and about those who are both black and gay. Although I was lucky to find my way home, many other black lesbians and gays are still searching for their homes. Only when African Americans, the lesbian and gay community, and families accept black homosexuals and love them for who they are will these now separate families regain many of their members. In so doing, they will help some to find their way back home and discover that many others are already there. (Boykin, 1996, 272)

Boykin maintains that he was lucky, but for many black gays luck is only a four-letter word.

Fortunately, there is more scholarly attention being directed toward black gay issues in hopes of counteracting this homophobia. Black gay scholars such as James Baldwin, Marlon Riggs, Essex Hemphill, Joseph Beam, Ron Simmons, Robert Reid-Pharr, Delroy Constantine-Simms, and Keith Boykin have certainly augmented the literature concerning black gay men; however, there is still an incredible need for more scholarly texts as well as fictional literature which examines/celebrates black gay life. There are also plays such as George C. Wolfe's *the Color Museum* and current films like *Blind Faith* and *Holiday Heart* that depict black gay men, but again, there is still a need for many more.

This thesis recommends that black gay men learn to depend on their own self-acceptance to usher them into communal acceptance. Additionally, it recommends that a new integrity be maintained by all people of African descent—an integrity that respects all members of the black community and embraces difference. This new integrity can only be birthed by years of healing by both black homosexuals and heterosexuals; however, this healing does



not have to happen exclusively. In fact, the researcher recommends interaction and dialogue between black homosexuals and heterosexuals continuously. This period of healing is also a perfect time to create new institutions that usher in liberation for everyone. Further, this thesis strongly recommends that the black community challenge constructs of black masculinity and manhood. The current constructs of masculinity and manhood are a foremost cause of the fragmented identities found in contemporary African-American gay men; thus, a reconstruction of black masculinity and manhood would be optimal.

Black children must also be taught very early to respect others, especially elders, and to embrace their brothers and sisters who are different. Beverly Guy-Sheftall in *Traps* says this:

At the beginning of a new century, Black men and women must struggle for "revolutionary selves, revolutionary lives, revolutionary relationships," which Toni Cade Bambara asserted three decades ago. Rejecting the traps of patriarchy, sexism, and homophobia, African-Americans might continue our journey toward freedom in racist America and offer new visions and possibilities for this nation, the world, and generations yet unborn. (Sheftall, 2001, 347)

The evidence of things unseen in black gay men has herein been shown; consequently, it is now time for black

men and women, homosexuals and heterosexuals, to work together to truly effect change. To neglect this calling is to plan for the demise of all people of African Descent.

## APPENDIX A

Below is an anonymous survey to examine sexual identity in African-American men who have or have had sex with men. The collected responses will be used to aid the research of Edward Brown II, M.A. (candidate) at Clark Atlanta University. Thank you for your time!

Please circle the response that best describes you.

Please circle an age group:

a. 18-22    b. 23-27    c. 28-32    d. 33-37    e. 37-40    f. over 41

(1.) Have you ever had any type of sex with another man?  
a. yes                      b. no

(2.) Do you currently have sex with men?  
a. yes                      b. no

(3.) Do you currently have sex with women?  
a. yes                      b. no

(4.) Is there a difference between gay, homosexual, and down-low?  
a. yes                      b. no

(5.) How do you identify yourself?  
a. gay            b. straight            c. bisexual            d. down-low/DL  
e. homosexual

(6.) Do you consider yourself  
a. Masculine    b. effeminate    c. both masculine and effeminate  
d. neither

(7.) Who are you open to about your sexual identity?  
a. everyone    b. family            c. friends  
d. co-workers/employees    e. church members  
f. only sexual partners

(8.) Do you feel that you can be open about your sexual identity at all times?  
a. yes                      b. no

- (9.) Do you feel that you cannot be open about your sexual identity at all times because
- a. you are afraid
  - b. it's too hard being both black and gay
  - c. most black men like other black men who are not open about their sexuality
  - d. because you are a real man
  - e. because of your family
  - f. because it goes against your religion
  - g. all of the above
  - h. none of the above
- (10.) Do you think that sexuality affects your status in
- a. the black community
  - b. the black gay community
  - c. work
  - d. church
  - e. school
  - f. all of the above

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